Yōkai

Yōkai (妖怪, *ghost*, *phantom*, *strange apparition*) are a class of supernatural monsters, spirits, and demons in Japanese folklore. The word *yōkai* is made up of the kanji for "bewitching; attractive; calamity" and "spectre; apparition; mystery; suspicious."[1] They can also be called ***ayakashi*** (あやかし), ***mononoke*** (物の怪) or ***mamono*** (魔物). *Yōkai* range diversely from the malevolent to the mischievous, or occasionally bring good fortune to those who encounter them.

A *yōkai* print by Kawanabe Kyōsai.

Yōkai often possess animal features (such as the *kappa*, which looks similar to a turtle, or the *tengu*, which has wings), yet others appear mostly human like kuchisake-onna. Some *yōkai* look like inanimate objects (such as *tsukumogami*), while others have no discernible shape. *Yōkai* usually have spiritual or supernatural abilities, with shapeshifting being the most common. *Yōkai* that shapeshift are called *bakemono* (化物) or *obake* (お化け).

Japanese folklorists and historians explain *yōkai* as personifications of "supernatural or unaccountable phenomena to their informants." In the Edo period, many artists, such as Toriyama Sekien, invented new *yōkai* by taking inspiration from folk tales or purely from their own imagination. Today, several such *yōkai* (e.g. Amikiri) are mistaken to originate in more traditional folklore.[2]

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Concept

What is thought of as "supernatural" depends on the time period; but generally, the older the time period, the greater the amount of phenomena that were deemed supernatural in character or cause.[4]

According to Japanese ideas of animism, spirit-like entities called (among other things) *mononoke* were believed to reside in all things.[5] Such spirits possessed emotions and personalities. If the spirit were peaceful, it was a *nigi-mitama*, bringing good fortune—such as bountiful harvests. Violent spirits, *ara-mitama*, brought ill fortune—including illness and natural disasters. One's ancestors and particularly-respected departed elders could be deemed *nigi-mitama*, accruing status as protective gods and receiving worship. Animals, objects and natural features or phenomena were also venerated as *nigi-mitama* or propitiated as *ara-mitama*—depending on the area.

"Chōchin-oiwa" by Katsushika Hokusai

The ritual for converting *ara-mitama* into *nigi-mitama* was called the *chinkon* ("the calming of the spirits").[6] *Chinkon* rituals were performed to quell maleficent spirits, prevent misfortune and alleviate fear from events and circumstances that could not otherwise be explained.[7] *Ara-mitama* that failed to achieve deification due to lack of sufficient veneration, or who lost their divinity following attrition of worshipers, became *yōkai*.[8]

Over time, those things thought to be supernatural became fewer and fewer. Meanwhile, depictions of *yōkai* in *emaki* and paintings began to standardize, turning into caricatures and softening their fearsome natures. Elements from tales of *yōkai* were increasingly mined for public entertainment. Use of *yōkai* in popular media began as early as the Middle Ages.[9] However, the mythology and lore of *yōkai* became more defined and formalized during the Edo period and after.[10]

Kidōmaru" by Utagawa Kuniyoshi

Types

The folklorist Tsutomu Ema studied the literature and paintings depicting *yōkai* and *henge* (変化, or "changed things/mutants") and divided them into categories, as presented in the *Nihon Yōkai Henge Shi* and the *Obake no Rekishi*.

- Five categories based on the *yōkai's* "true form": human, animal, plant, object, or natural phenomenon.
- Four categories depending on source of mutation: this-world related, spiritual/mental related, reincarnation/next-world related, or material related.
- Seven categories based on external appearance: human, animal, plant, artifact, structure/building, natural object or phenomenon, and miscellaneous—as well as compound classifications for *yōkai* falling into more than one category.

In traditional Japanese folkloristics, *yōkai* are classified (not unlike the nymphs of Greek mythology) by location or phenomenon associated with their manifestation. *Yōkai* are indexed in the book *Sogo Nihon Minzoku Goi* (綜合日本民俗語彙, "A Complete Dictionary of Japanese Folklore")[11] as follows:

- *Yama no ke* (mountains), *michi no ke* (paths), *ki no ke* (trees), *mizu no ke* (water), *umi no ke* (the sea), *yuki no ke* (snow), *oto no ke* (sound), *doubutsu no ke* (animals, either real or imaginary)

"Nekomata" from the Hyakkai Zukan by Sawaki Suushi

History

Ancient history

- First century: there is a book from what is now China titled 循史伝 with the statement "the spectre (yōkai) was in the imperial court for a long time. The king asked Tui for the reason. He answered that there was great anxiety and he gave a recommendation to empty the imperial room" (久之 宮中数有妖怪（妖怪） 王以問遂 遂以為有大憂 宮室将空), thus using "妖怪" to mean "phenomenon that surpasses human knowledge."
- Houki 8 (772): in the Shoku Nihongi, there is the statement "shinto purification is performed because yōkai appear very often in the imperial court, (大祓、宮中にしきりに、妖怪あるためなり)," using the word "yōkai" to mean not anything in particular, but strange phenomena in general.
- Middle of the Heian era (794-1185/1192): In The Pillow Book by Sei Shōnagon, there is the statement "there are tenacious mononoke (いと執念き御もののけに侍るめり)" as well as a statement by Murasaki Shikibu that "the mononoke have become quite dreadful (御もののけのいみじうこはきなりけり)," which are the first appearances of the word "mononoke."
- Koubu 3 (1370): In the Taiheiki, in the fifth volume, there is the statement, "Sagami no Nyudo was not at all frightened by yōkai."

"Tsuchigumo" from the *Shinkei Sanjurokkai Sen* (新形三十六怪撰) by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi

The ancient times were a period abundant in literature and folktales mentioning and explaining *yōkai*. Literature such as the Kojiki, the Nihon Shoki, and various Fudoki expositioned on legends from the ancient past, and mentions of *oni*, *orochi*, among other kinds of mysterious phenomena can already be seen in them.[12] In the Heian period, collections of stories about *yōkai* and other supernatural phenomena were published in multiple volumes, starting with publications such as the Nihon Ryōiki and the Konjaku Monogatarishū, and in these publications, mentions of phenomena such as Hyakki Yagyō can be seen.[13] The *yōkai* that appear in these literature were passed on to later generations.[14] However, despite the literature mentioning and explaining these *yōkai*, they were never given any visual depictions. In Buddhist paintings such as the Hell Scroll (Nara National Museum), which came from the later Heian

period, there are visual expressions of the idea of *oni*, but actual visual depictions would only come later in the Middle Ages, from the Kamakura period and beyond.[15]

Gama Yōkai from the *Saigama to Ukiyo Soushi Kenkyu* Volume 2, special issue *Kaii*[3] Tamababaki

Yamata no Orochi was originally a local god but turned into a *yōkai* that was slain by Susanoo.[16] Yasaburo was originally a bandit whose vengeful spirit (*onryo*) turned into a poisonous snake upon death and plagued the water in a paddy, but eventually became deified as the "wisdom god of the well (井の明神)."[17] *Kappa* and *inugami* are sometimes treated as gods in one area and *yōkai* in other areas. From these examples, it can be seen that among Japanese gods, there are some beings that can go from god to *yōkai* and vice versa.[18]

Post-classical history

Narikama from the *Gazu Hyakki Tsurezure Bukuro* by Sekien Toriyama

Medieval Japan was a time period where publications such as *Emakimono*, *Otogizōshi*, and other visual depictions of *yōkai* started to appear. While there were religious publications such as the *Jisha Engi* (寺社縁起), others, such as the *Otogizōshi*, were intended more for entertainment, starting the trend where *yōkai* became more and more seen as subjects of entertainment. For examples, tales of *yōkai* extermination could be said to be a result of emphasizing the superior status of human society over *yōkai*.[9] Publications included:

- The Ooe-yama Shuten-doji Emaki (about an *oni*), the *Zegaibou Emaki* (about a *tengu*), the *Tawara no Touta Emaki* (俵藤太絵巻) (about a giant snake and a centipede), the *Tsuchigumo Zoshi* (土蜘蛛草紙) (about *tsuchigumo*), and the *Dojo-ji Engi Emaki* (about a giant snake). These *emaki* were about *yōkai* that come from even older times.
- The *Kitano Tenjin Engi Emaki*, in which Sugawara no Michizane was a lightning god who took on the form of an *oni*, and despite attacking people after doing this, he was still deified as a god in the end.[9]
- The *Junirui Emaki*, the *Tamamono Soshi*, (both about Tamamo-no-Mae), and the *Fujibukuro Soushi Emaki* (about a monkey). These *emaki* told of *yōkai* mutations of animals.

Yamata no Orochi from the *Nihon-ryakushi: Susanoo* by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi

- The *Tsukumogami Emaki*, which told tales of thrown away none-too-precious objects that come to have a spirit residing in them planning evil deeds against humans, and ultimately get exorcised and sent to peace.
- The *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki*, depicting many different kinds of *yōkai* all marching together

In this way, *yōkai* that were mentioned only in writing were given a visual appearance in the Middle Ages. In the Otogizōshi, familiar tales such as Urashima Tarō and Issun-bōshi also appeared.

The next major change in *yōkai* came after the period of warring states, in the Edo period.

Modern history

The *Hyakki Yagyo Emaki*, author unknown. It comes from the Muromachi period.

Edo period

- Enpō 6 (1677): Publication of the Shokoku Hyakumonogatari, a collection of tales of various monsters.
- Hōei 6 (1706): Publication of the Otogi Hyakumonogatari. In volumes such as "Miyazu no Ayakashi" (volume 1) and "Unpin no Yōkai" (volume 4), collections of tales that seem to come from China were adapted into a Japanese setting.[19]
- Shōtoku 2 (1712): Publication of the Wakan Sansai Zue by Terajima Ryōan, a collection of tales based on the Chinese Sancai Tuhui.
- Shōtoku 6 (1716): In the specialized dictionary *Sesetsu Kojien* (世説故事苑), there is an entry on *yōkai*, which stated, "among the commoners in my society, there are many kinds of kaiji (mysterious phenomena), often mispronounced by commoners as 'kechi.' Types include the cry of weasels, the howling of foxes, the bustling of mice, the rising of the chicken, the cry of the birds, the pooping of the birds on clothing, and sounds similar to voices that come from cauldrons and bottles. These types of things appear in the *Shōseiroku*, methods of exorcising them can be seen, so it should serve as a basis."[20]
- Tenmei 8 (1788): Publication of the Bakemono chakutocho by Masayoshi Kitao. This was a *kibyoshi* diagram book of *yōkai*, but it was prefaced with the statement "it can be said that the so-called yōkai in our society is a representation of our feelings that arise from fear" (世にいふようくわいはおくびょうよりおこるわが心をむかふへあらわしてみるといえども ...),[21] and already in this era, while *yōkai* were being researched, it indicated that there were people who questioned whether yōkai really existed or not.

It was in this era that the technology of the printing press and publication was first started to be widely used, that a publishing culture developed, and was frequently a subject of *kibyoshi*[22] and other publications.

As a result, *kashi-hon* shops that handled such books spread and became widely used, making the general public's impression of each *yōkai* fixed, spreading throughout all of Japan. For example, before the Edo period, there were plenty of interpretations about what the *yōkai* were that were classified as *kappa*, but because of books and publishing, the notion of *kappa* became anchored to what is now the modern notion of *kappa*. Also, including other kinds of publications, other than *yōkai* born from folk legend, there were also many invented *yōkai* that were created through puns or word plays, and the Gazu Hyakki Hagyo by Sekien Toriyama is one example of that. Also, when the Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai became popular in the Edo period, it is thought that one reason for the appearance of new *yōkai* was a demand for entertaining ghost stories about *yōkai* no one has ever heard of before, resulting in some ō that were simply made up for the purpose of telling an entertaining story, and the *kasa-obake* and the *tōfu-kozō* are known examples of these.[23]

They are also frequently depicted in *ukiyo-e*, and there are artists that have drawn famous *yōkai* like Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Yoshitoshi, Kawanabe Kyōsai, and Hokusai, and there are also Hyakki Yagyō books made by artists of the Kanō school.

In this period, toys and games like *karuta* and *sugoroku*, frequently used *yōkai* as characters. Thus, with the development of a publishing culture, *yōkai* depictions that were treasured in temples and shrines were able to become something more familiar to people, and it is thought that this is the reason that even though *yōkai* were originally things to be feared, they have then became characters that people feel close to.[24]

Meiji period

- Meiji 24 (1891): Publication of the *Seiyou Youkai Kidan* by Shibue Tamotsu. It introduced folktales from Europe, such as the Grimm Tales.
- Meiji 29 (1896): Publication of the *Yōkaigaku Kogi* by Inoue Enryō
- Meiji 33 (1900): Performance of the kabuki *Yami no Ume Hyakumonogatari* at the Kabuki-za in January. It was a performance in which appeared numerous *yōkai* such as the *kasa ippon ashi*, skeletons, *yuki-onna*, *osakabe-hime*, among others. Onoe Kikugorō V played the role of many of these, such as the *osakabe-hime*.
- Taishō 3 (1914): Publication of the *Shokubutsu Kaiko* by Mitsutaro Shirai. Shirai expositioned on plant *yōkai* from the point of view of a plant pathologist and herbalist.

"The Heavy Basket" from the *Shinkei Sanjurokkei Sen* by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (Meiji 25)

With the Meiji Restoration, Western ideas and translated western publications began to make an impact, and western tales were particularly sought after. Things like *binbogami*, *yakubyogami*, and *shinigami* were talked about, and *shinigami* were even depicted in classical *rakugo*, and although the *shinigami* were misunderstood as a kind of Japanese *yōkai* or *kami*, they actually became well known among the populace through a *rakugo* called "Shinigami" in San'yūtei Enchō, which were adoptions of European tales such as the Grimm fairy tale "Godfather Death" and the Italian opera "Crispino" (1850). Also, in Meiji 41 (1908), Kyōka Izumi and Tobari Chikufuu jointedly translated Gerhart Hauptmann's play *The Sunken Bell*. Later works of Kyōka such as Yasha ga Ike were influenced by *The Sunken Bell*, and so it can be seen that folktales that come from the West became adapted into Japanese tales of yōkai.

Shōwa period

Since yōkai are introduced in various kinds of media, they have become well known among the old, the young, men and women. The *kamishibai* from before the war, and the *manga* industry, as well as the *kashi-hon* shops that continued to exist until around Showa 40 (the 1970s), as well as television contributed to the public knowledge and familiarity with *yōkai*. *Yōkai* play a role in attracting tourism revitalizing local regions, like the places depicted in the Tono Monogatari like Tono, Iwate, Iwate Prefecture and the Tottori Prefecture, which is Shigeru Mizuki's place of birth.

In this way, *yōkai* are spoken about in legends in various forms, but traditional oral storytelling by the elders and the older people is rare, and regionally unique situations and background in oral storytelling are not easily conveyed. For example, the classical *yōkai* represented by *tsukumogami* can only be felt as something realistic by living close to nature, such as with *tanuki* (Japanese raccoon dogs), foxes and weasels. Furthermore, in the suburbs, and other regions, even when living in a primary-sector

environment, there are tools that are no longer seen, such as the inkstone, the *kama* (a large cooking pot), or the *tsurube* (a bucket used for getting water from a well), and there exist *yōkai* that are reminiscent of old lifestyles such as the *azukiarai* and the *dorotabo*. As a result, even for those born in the first decade of the Showa period (1925–1935), except for some who were evacuated to the countryside, they would feel that those things that become *yōkai* are "not familiar" are "not very understandable." For example, in classical *rakugo*, even though people understand the words and what they refer to, they are not able to imagine it as something that could be realistic. Thus, the modernization of society has had a negative effect on the place of yōkai in classical Japanese culture.

On the other hand, the *yōkai* introduced through mass media are not limited to only those that come from classical sources like folklore, and just as in the Edo period, new fictional *yōkai* continue to be invented, such as scary school stories and other urban legends like *kuchisake-onna* and *Hanako-san*, giving birth to new *yōkai*. From 1975 onwards, starting with the popularity of *kuchisake-onna*, these urban legends began to be referred to in mass media as "modern *yōkai*."[25] This terminology was also used in recent publications dealing with urban legends,[26] and the researcher on yōkai, Bintarō Yamaguchi, used this especially frequently.[25]

During the 1970s, many books were published that introduced *yōkai* through encyclopaedias, illustrated reference books, and dictionaries as a part of children's horror books, but along with the *yōkai* that come from classics like folklore, *kaidan*, and essays, it has been pointed out by modern research that there are some mixed in that do not come from classics, but were newly created. Some well-known examples of these are the *gashadokuro* and the *jubokko*. For example, Arifumi Sato is known to be a creator of modern *yōkai*, and Shigeru Mizuki, a manga artist for *yōkai*, in writings concerning research about *yōkai*, pointed out that newly created *yōkai* do exist,[27][28] and Mizuki himself, through *GeGeGe no Kitaro*, created about 30 new yōkai.[29] There has been much criticism that this mixing of classical *yōkai* with newly created *yōkai* is making light of tradition and legends.[27][28] However, since there have already been those from the Edo period like Sekien Toriyama who created many new *yōkai*, there is also the opinion that it is unreasonable to criticize modern creations without doing the same for classical creations too.[27] Furthermore, there is a favorable view that says that introducing various *yōkai* characters through these books nurtured creativity and emotional development of young readers of the time.[28]

In popular culture

Category:Yōkai in popular culture

See also

- Anito – Ancestor spirits, nature spirits, and deities (diwata) in the indigenous animistic religions of precolonial Philippines
- Dokkaebi
- Genius – In ancient Roman religion, an individual instance of a general divine nature that is present in every individual person, place, or thing
- Jinn – Supernatural spirits integrated in Islamic beliefs
- Kijimunaa (legendary beings from the Ryukyu Islands)
- Kunekune (urban legend)
- List of legendary creatures from Japan
- Obake
- Oni – Kind of yōkai from Japanese folklore, variously translated as demons, devils, ogres or trolls
- Tengu – A type of legendary creature found in Japanese folk religion
- Tsukumogami
- Yaoguai – Creature from Chinese mythology

- Yōsei
- Yūrei

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